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Author(s): S. G. F. Brandon

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S. G. F. BRANDON

*Professor of Comparative Religion in the University of Manchester*

## THE ORIGIN OF DEATH IN SOME ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN RELIGIONS<sup>1</sup>

The Irish poet W. B. Yeats once wrote, with great sapience and perception:

Nor dread, nor hope attend  
A dying animal;  
A man awaits his end  
Dreading and hoping all.

That death has ever been a problem to man is attested as far back as we can trace our species in the archaeological record—indeed, it seems to have been a problem even for that immediate precursor of *homo sapiens*, the so-called Neanderthal Man; for he buried his dead.<sup>2</sup>

The burial of the dead is a custom peculiar to man, and also to his hominian precursors. The custom was clearly not motivated by considerations of hygiene, but by ideas that extended beyond the authentication of the senses. Thus, while the Palaeolithic peoples must have been only too well acquainted with the cessation of activity and the physical disintegration consequent on death, their burial practices indicate their belief that the dead still had needs and required the tendance of the living. Accordingly, they placed in the graves of their dead food, ornaments and implements attesting some crude idea of a *post-mortem* life, conceived in terms of life in this world. Nor was this all: some Palaeolithic burials show that the corpse had been covered with a red pigment—the motive was undoubtedly magical, namely, to revitalise the dead. The majority of Palaeolithic graves also reveal that the dead were buried in a crouched position—the practice has been variously explained as simulating the pre-natal position, being inspired by an idea of rebirth or as due to a fear of the dead.<sup>3</sup>

This concern about the dead, which is thus attested from the very dawn of human culture, must surely imply speculation about death—about its cause and its nature. What Palaeolithic man thought about it can only be deduced from the archaeological data that have survived of his culture, and from that, as we have just noted, it would appear that, although belief

<sup>1</sup> A lecture given to the Old Testament Society at their meeting in Manchester, July 1965.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. S. G. F. Brandon, *Man and his Destiny in the Great Religions* (Manchester University Press, 1962), pp. 8–9. This work, often to be cited, contains full documentation.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *op. cit.*, pp. 8–13.

in an after-life seems general, there was some variety of idea as to its nature and the condition of the dead. Another inference which, I think, we may fairly make about all burial practices, in every age and culture, is that what was done by the living on behalf of the dead had always a personal reference—in other words, as a man buries his dead, he is inevitably led to reflect upon his own mortality, to anticipate his own experience of that which has befallen the one he now buries.

But this does not sum the whole significance of man's funerary customs, dating as they do from the Upper Palaeolithic era. They have an even more profound meaning which, I believe, it is important to grasp before we come to consider the relevant evidence appertaining to the literate cultures of the ancient Near East. In a recent book, *History, Time and Deity*,<sup>1</sup> I have set out the thesis that religion originates from the basic sense of insecurity that stems from man's awareness of Time. Briefly, as I see it, human consciousness is, fundamentally, consciousness of the three temporal categories of past, present and future. This means that our experience of the here-now of the present is essentially conditioned by memory of the past and anticipation of the future. From this complex of thought and emotion, we know that we are subject to change, decay, and, ultimately, death. This knowledge which constitutes the very quintessence of being human, is profoundly disturbing. For it produces within us a profound sense of insecurity, and a corresponding urge to seek for some form of assurance of eternal well being—some happy and secure state beyond the effacing flux of Time and its menace of personal disintegration in death.

Evidence of this is found in the earliest religious texts that have come down to us, namely, the *Pyramid Texts*, which date from the middle of the third millennium B.C. There we find, for example, the dead pharaoh seeking eternal security by joining the sun-god in his solar boat on his unceasing journey through the heavens.<sup>2</sup> The motive, which lies behind this early Egyptian conception, is essentially the same as that which inspires the solutions offered by other and more sophisticated religions, from the *Nirvāna* of Buddhism to the Beatific Vision of Christianity.

This introduction has been necessary in order to set the stage for the subject proper of my paper. If, as I submit, religion stems from man's fundamental sense of insecurity caused by his awareness of Time, and that it inevitably focuses upon death, we should expect that, as man's mind developed, he would seek to explain death to himself—in other words, we should expect to find a mythology of death and that it should be informative of man's evaluation of his destiny.

Let us turn, now, to the more important religions of the ancient Near East, in an endeavour to discover how the origin and nature of death were ac-

<sup>1</sup> Manchester University Press, 1965.

<sup>2</sup> *Pyr.* 366c, 367b.

counted for in the earliest literate societies. We will begin with the Egyptian evidence, since it is particularly abundant and of a rather dramatic quality. However, at first sight, if we start, as we must, with the *Pyramid Texts*, we find that this vast corpus of spells and prayers, hymns and incantations, seems almost destitute of a mythology of death. There is, indeed, one brief reference which comes in an assurance to the dead pharaoh that he had been born before death came into existence (*Pyr.* 1466 d).<sup>1</sup> The logic implicit in the statement is that the king could not really die, since he belonged to an order of being that was prior to that in which death had power or currency. Clearly a primordial state was envisaged, existent even before, perhaps, the so-called 'first time' (*sp tpy*), when there was neither decay nor death; in other words, a state of being outside Time.<sup>2</sup> Of how death did actually originate, and whether it was contingent on creation and the start of the temporal process, nothing is said. Whether such questions occurred to the Egyptians of the Old Kingdom period we do not know. That they did not formally concern themselves with them, is probably due to the motives which inspired their cosmogonic systems. The four classic cosmogonies of Heliopolis, Memphis, Hermopolis and Thebes were, each, primarily concerned to present its own local deity as the original creator of the other gods, and with showing that its sanctuary marked the place, i.e. the primeval hill, where creation was begun. Consequently these cosmogonies are concerned with theology, not with anthropology—they say nothing of the origin of mankind, of the reason for its creation or of its destiny.<sup>3</sup>

This apparent unconcern of Egyptian mythology with the origin and purpose of man is indeed surprising, especially when compared with the creation legends of Mesopotamia and of the Hebrews, as we shall see. It is, however, to be explained by the fact that in Egyptian religion the *post-mortem* life of man was almost entirely the concern of one god, namely Osiris, who was not a creator-god.<sup>4</sup>

For the Egyptians the significance of Osiris lay in his *hieros logos* or legend; for it provided the *rationale* of the mortuary cultus, which in turn was the practical expression of the Egyptian doctrine of man. Starting as a royal prerogative, the Osirian funerary cultus was gradually democratised until by the New Kingdom period, in a very true sense, Osiris became 'Everyman'; for, by virtue of the Osirian mortuary ritual, every deceased person, on whose behalf the rites were performed, was ritually assimilated to Osiris in both death and resurrection. This meant that the legend of Osiris came to

<sup>1</sup> Cf. C. E. Sander-Hansen, *Der Begriff des Todes bei den Aegyptern* (Copenhagen, 1942), pp. 18–20; Brandon, *Man and his Destiny*, p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Brandon, *Creation Legends of the Ancient Near East* (London, 1963), p. 62.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Creation Legends*, chapter II.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Man and his Destiny*, pp. 63, 66–7.

symbolise the destiny of every man. Accordingly, the death of Osiris epitomised the experience of all men.<sup>1</sup>

Now, as is well known, Osiris died a violent death at the hands of his evilly disposed brother, Set. The death itself is never actually represented in Egyptian art, probably because such a representation would have been deemed baleful, and, therefore, dangerous. However, many references and allusions, from the time of the *Pyramid Texts*, give sufficient indication of how the event was envisaged. We hear, for example, of the goddesses Isis and Nephthys finding Osiris, 'as his brother Set laid him low in *Ndj*'.<sup>2</sup> The consequences of this death are very realistically depicted, and with emphasis: e.g. the disintegration of the body, the falling off of the head, putrefaction and stench. The recurrent emphasis upon these consequences in the mortuary texts significantly illustrate the Egyptians' preoccupation with the physical results of death. The whole elaborate process of embalmment and mummification was, of course, intended to preserve the dead against this disintegration and corruption.

The death of Osiris as the result of the attack of an enemy symbolises, therefore, the Egyptian conception of death. It was not seen as a natural and necessary thing; but as something that should not be—something that comes from an evil agency. Death is, accordingly, conceived as an enemy who attacks and seizes his victim. Thus, in a prayer in the *Coffin Texts*, the plea is made: 'Do not seize me, do not catch me, do not against me your intent' (*C. T.* IV, 40 p; 41 c). Such a conception necessarily involved personification. The iconography of Set was early established, although the problem of its origin still defies solution. Depicted with a human body and the head of a strange repulsive animal, having a long snout and long erect ears, Set, the murderer of Osiris, became the Egyptian Devil or god of Evil, who either himself, or through his assistant demons, brought death to men by violent assault.<sup>3</sup>

Death, therefore, for the Egyptians was essentially accidental, even if unavoidable. But unavoidable though it may be, its baleful consequences could be arrested and reversed. The resurrection to life, which Osiris had achieved, could be enjoyed by all who were assimilated to him through the mortuary ritual—the whole complex of ritual and practical action, including embalmment, was modelled on what was believed to have been done by various deities for Osiris, whereby he was saved from death and raised to life again—howbeit that life was not a return to the *pre-mortem* state of being.<sup>4</sup> Thus, it would appear that the Egyptians were never led to produce a myth concerning the origin of death. Instinctively regarding death as an unnatural

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Man and his Destiny*, pp. 35 ff., where full documentation is given.

<sup>2</sup> *Pyr.* 1255.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. H. Bonnet, *Reallexikon der ägyptischen Religionsgeschichte* (Berlin, 1952), pp. 707, 711b–715; Brandon, 'The Personification of Death in some Ancient Religions' (*Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 43, 1961), p. 322; J. Zandee, *Death as an Enemy* (Leiden, 1960), pp. 85–7, 184–6.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Brandon in *The Saviour God* (Manchester University Press, 1963), pp. 18–28.

event, as something caused by demonic attack, the legend of Osiris constituted a dramatic aetiology, which both explained the incidence of death and sanctioned hope that salvation could be had from its dread entail.

In striking contrast to the Egyptians, the inhabitants of ancient Mesopotamia were profoundly concerned with the question of the origin of death. This concern was, however, linked with their very great interest in human destiny—what was man and for what purpose had he been created? Evidence of this interest dates from the Sumerian period. In a text, which Professor Kramer dates for the third millennium B.C., the god Enki is depicted as both creating mankind and as being responsible for the fatal defects in human nature. The reason for the creation of man is clearly stated, and it continued to be the reason accepted by subsequent generations. It is set forth in the following lines, in which Nammu, the personification of the primordial sea, is represented as urging her son Enki, who was both the Sumerian god of wisdom and the water-god, to relieve the other gods from the toil of having to provide their own food:

O my son, rise from thy bed, from thy . . . work what is wise,  
Fashion *servants* of the gods, may they produce their . . .

Enki agrees to do what his mother requires, and the text continues with an account of how he fashioned men out of clay.<sup>1</sup> The use of this material raises an interesting question. The idea of creating things out of clay naturally came from the technique of pottery—early man was evidently impressed by the ability of the potter to give various shapes to a formless mass of clay, and, then, by firing, to make these shapes firm and permanent. Indeed, in ancient Egyptian thought, the ram-headed god Khnum is depicted seated at a potter's wheel, on which he forms men of clay.<sup>2</sup> However, despite the obvious source of the idea of Enki's act of creation, we may wonder whether the making of man out of earth or clay might not also have contained a deeper meaning—that man comes out of the earth, he is nourished by its products, and he finally returns to it. The fashioning of Adam out of the *'adāmāh*, in the Yahwist creation story, suggests the possibility, as we shall see. However that may be, the sequel to this act of creation in the Sumerian myth has great significance. To celebrate the creation of these new servants, the gods hold a feast, during which Enki and the goddess Ninmah are led to challenge each other's skill and ingenuity. First, Ninmah makes some human freaks, namely, a barren woman and a eunuch, and challenges Enki to find a use for them in the social structure. Enki does so successfully; then he challenges Ninmah. Although the text is unfortunately obscure at this point, it would appear that Enki made a misshapen and

<sup>1</sup> S. N. Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology* (Philadelphia, 1944), pp. 68–72.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Brandon, *Creation Legends*, pp. 60–1.



diseased creature, with which Ninmah can do nothing. She curses Enki, because apparently what he had made could not be unmade.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, it would seem that in this text we have a Sumerian aetiological myth designed to explain three things: (i) the purpose of mankind, namely, to serve the gods; (ii) the origin of such freaks as barren women and eunuchs—they are due to the sport of the gods, but they could be integrated into the social system—‘given bread to eat’, according to the accepted phrase; (iii) the origin of disease, and perhaps old age, thus leading to death.

The creation of mankind, to build temples and provide sacrifices for the gods, figures in many other texts, both Sumerian and Akkadian. There are variations concerning the substance, or some of the substance, out of which men are made. The best known instance, is, of course, in the famous *Enuma elish*, the great creation epic which was recited annually at the New Year Festival at Babylon. There Marduk, the god of Babylon, is represented as, after fashioning the universe out of the body of the monster Ti’âmat, creating mankind out of the blood of Kingu, a monster that had assisted Ti’âmat in her attempt to exterminate the gods. This creation of man out of the blood of an evil being has led to much speculation as to whether some *motif* of original sin was present in the mind of the author of the epic. The balance of evidence seems definitely against this being so; nor does it seem likely, as it has been suggested, that there was any intention to account for human mortality this way—namely, that the creation of man involved death, so that man in turn has to pay back for his life by himself dying—in other words, a kind of Babylonian anticipation of the maxim of Anaximander, that all things have to pay for their injustice ‘according to the assessment of Time’.<sup>2</sup>

If the Mesopotamian cosmogonies are, accordingly, not very explicit as to the origin of death, that superb product of Mesopotamian literary genius, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, certainly is. Its classic statement comes in the advice addressed to Gilgamesh to persuade him that his quest for immortality is vain. The hero, it will be recalled, is appalled when he witnesses the death of his friend Enkidu. Although profoundly grieved by the loss of his companion, what disturbs Gilgamesh even more deeply is that in the death of Enkidu he sees a presage of his own demise. Shocked by so awful a prospect, he determines to visit Utanapishtim, the Babylonian Noah, who, according to Mesopotamian folklore, had alone achieved immortality. Utanapishtim dwells beyond the margin of the world, and, to reach him, Gilgamesh has to undergo much suffering and many ordeals. *En route* he meets the so-called wine-maiden Siduri, who is made the mouthpiece of the Mesopotamian *carpe-diem* philosophy of life. She addresses him, commenting upon his quest:

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Creation Legends*, pp. 77–8.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Creation Legends*, chapter III.

Gilgamesh, whither runnest thou?  
 The life thou seekest thou wilt not find;  
 (for) when the gods created mankind,  
 They allotted death to mankind,  
 (But) life they retained in their keeping.  
 Thou, O Gilgamesh, let thy belly be full;  
 Day and night be thou merry;  
 Make every day (a day of) rejoicing.  
 Day and night do thou dance and play.  
 Let thy raiment be clean.  
 Thy head be washed, (and) thyself bathed in water.  
 Cherish the little one holding thy hand,  
 (And) let thy wife rejoice in thy bosom.  
 This is the lot of mankind. . .<sup>1</sup>

Here, then, the cause of death is clearly stated. It results from the divine will; the gods did not grant to their creatures the immortal nature that they themselves enjoyed. In other words, death was natural to man, being inherent in the nature with which he was endowed. This belief colours the whole of Mesopotamian eschatology, which was pessimistic to a degree. For, since death was regarded as the common lot of mankind, being necessitated by the divine decree, none could hope to escape from it. However, it is interesting to note that, despite the innate realism of the Mesopotamians about human mortality, they were unable to free themselves from the primitive belief in survival. And this inability led to untold mental anguish, which finds expression in so much of Mesopotamian literature. It might be supposed that the logic of their conception of man as mortal by nature, being fashioned out of clay, would have led them to regard death as personal extinction. But this was too sophisticated a concept for them, and they persisted in believing that something survived the disintegration of death. But what did survive was horribly transformed into a daemonic being that could terribly torment the living, as innumerable divination texts so graphically show.

The belief that man was by nature mortal, because the gods had withheld immortality from him, was a notion that the Mesopotamians had evidently reached on intellectual grounds. Their literature, however, reveals that a primitive personification of death as a baleful daemonic being, which seizes its victim, was also instinctively held and was very influential. Thus, before his end, Enkidu dreams of his coming death, and he significantly imagines himself seized by some awful being. As he tells his friend Gilgamesh of his terrifying experience:

<sup>1</sup> Tab. X, col. ii, 1-11; trans. A. Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic* (Chicago University Press, 1949), pp. 69-70. Cf. *Man and his Destiny*, pp. 91-3.



... he transforms me.  
 That mine arms are covered with feathers like a bird,  
 He looks at me (and) leads me to the house of darkness,  
 to the dwelling of Irkalla;  
 To the house from which he who enters never goes forth;  
 On the road whose path does not lead back;  
 To the house whose inhabitants are bereft of light;  
 Where dust is their food and clay their sustenance;  
 (Where) they are clad like birds.<sup>1</sup>

Quite clearly the imagery here is inspired by the same primitive fear as that which finds expression, as we have seen, in certain Egyptian texts, and for which parallels could be cited from other religions. Such imagery, of course, envisages death as the violent assault and carrying off of the victim by a monstrous being. The concept naturally leads to the idea of a death-god, or of the daemonic assistant of such a baleful deity. The idea of a god of death does actually occur in an Assyrian text of the seventh century B.C., where a rash visitor to the underworld sees 'Death with a *mušhuššu*-head, his two hands (were the hands of) men, his two feet (of) serpents'.<sup>2</sup>

This Mesopotamian evidence is significant; for it shows that even where a definite effort was made to account for death as the inevitable consequence of the mortal nature of man, popular imagination persisted in envisaging death as a violent seizure of the individual by some supernatural being, fearfully conceived as the death-god or his minion.

Before leaving the evidence of Mesopotamian culture, we may briefly notice two items that have a certain relevance to our theme. It would seem that, while the realism of their minds caused the Mesopotamians to see death as originating from a divine decree, from which there was no escape, they also indulged in some wishful thinking about immortality. Thus, in the famous *Epic of Gilgamesh*, although, as we have seen, death is presented as inevitable for mankind, the idea of a kind of elixir of perpetual youth also finds place. Utanapishtim is represented as telling Gilgamesh of a plant that 'makes the old man as the young man'. Gilgamesh succeeds in obtaining it, only to lose it to a serpent—we probably have here an aetiological myth, inspired by the folk belief that the snake, by sloughing off its skin, has learnt the secret of self-rejuvenation at the expense of man.<sup>3</sup>

The myth of Adapa, which apparently had a wide currency in the ancient Near East, also contains the motif of man's aboriginal loss of immortality. Adapa, who was summoned before the tribunal of Anu, the sky-god, to answer for an offence, is warned before he goes by his patron deity Enki not to accept any food or drink that he might be offered by Anu, since they would prove

<sup>1</sup> Tab. VII, col. iv, 31-41; trans. Heidel, p. 36.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. E. Ebeling, *Tod und Leben nach den Vorstellungen des Babylonier* (Berlin/Leipzig, 1931), vol. 1, (5)3; Brandon in *B.J.R.L.*, vol. 43 (1961), p. 324.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Man and his Destiny*, p. 93.

fatal. Having been acquitted by Anu, Adapa is offered the 'food of life' and the 'water of life'; but, following Enki's advice, he refuses them and so, unwittingly, loses the chance of immortality. Some scholars have sought to see in Adapa a kind of Adam or progenitor of the human race. Such an identification would, of course, render the transaction very significant; for it would attest a Mesopotamian belief that mankind was doomed to death because its progenitor had been tricked out of the opportunity of becoming immortal. However, not only would such an idea run counter to all that we otherwise know of the Mesopotamian *Weltanschauung*, but it seems very improbable that Adapa was regarded as the First Man.<sup>1</sup>

From Mesopotamia we turn to the Hebrew mythology of death. In its best known and most obvious form, this is essentially aetiological—and is, indeed, inspired by a very definite theological motive. In its concern to account for the origin of death, it is akin to the products of Mesopotamian thought, which we have just noticed; but it differs strikingly from them in the solution it offers.

The Hebrew explanation of death is, of course, contained in the Yahwist account of the creation and fall of Adam, and for its vivid and dramatic presentation it is unique among the mythologies of death. The narrative concerned has been the subject of generations of scholarly research to which many members of the Old Testament Society have made invaluable contributions. The interpretation, which I am about to outline, I have already presented in my book *Creation Legends of the Ancient Near East*: it contains one original suggestion (at least I have not met it elsewhere), and I welcome an opportunity of having it considered by experts.

I believe that the story of the creation and fall of Adam was part of what might fairly be called 'the Yahwist philosophy of history'. It introduces the Primeval History, which was designed to provide a prologue to the Patriarchal Sagas, which in turn led on to the narrative of the Exodus and the Settlement in Canaan, the land of Yahweh's ancient promise. In other words, it forms an integral, and an essential, part of the Yahwist doctrine of Israel's Election by Yahweh. Consequently, I see the story as designed to provide a kind of *raison d'être* for the Yahwist view of human nature and destiny, and to rebut the presuppositions of the popular mortuary cultus, namely, that the dead lived on in their tombs: the adoption of both these attitudes was necessitated by the interests of the ethnic creed, which was the quintessence of Yahwism. This means that I see the Yahwist account of the origin of death as part of a consciously composed theological doctrine—although, of course, embodying much traditional material.<sup>2</sup>

If we look first at the story as a whole, we find that it presents a drama which has three distinct acts or episodes. In the first act, we see Yahweh

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Man and his Destiny*, pp. 87–9.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Brandon, *History, Time and Deity*, pp. 126–9.

creating Adam out of the 'adāmāh or clay. He animates him by breathing into his nostrils the *nishmāth chay'yim*, 'the breath of life', so that Adam becomes a *nephesh chayyāh*, 'living soul'.<sup>1</sup> Such a description might be taken as indicating that, though Adam's body was made of clay, his life or soul came from God. Such an inference must, however, be qualified by the fact that Yahweh presumably made and animated the animals in a similar way, since each animal is also described as a *nephesh chayyāh* ('living soul').<sup>2</sup>

Nothing, therefore, is specifically said, in the account of Adam's creation, to suggest that he is made to be mortal or that he has an immortal soul. Now we come to a well-known crux of the story. Adam is placed by his creator in the Garden of Eden, to live an idyllic existence. Located in the centre of the garden are the two famous trees: the 'tree of life' and the 'tree of the knowledge of good and evil'.<sup>3</sup> Now, if the 'tree of life' was part of the original story, or, if the author realised its logical implication if it were part of the story, then Adam, the Primal Man, must have been considered as already inherently mortal. However, I agree with those scholars who think that the 'tree of life' was either an after-thought of the writer or that he did not realise its logical implication. The idea of a miraculous plant, that would confer immortality or perpetual youth, occurs in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, as we have seen, and I believe that there is much reason for thinking that the Yahwist writer knew the *Epic* well and from there took the idea of the 'tree of life'.<sup>4</sup>

It is the nature of the 'tree of the knowledge of good and evil' that particularly commands our attention; for it dominates the second act of the drama and it holds the key to our understanding the meaning of Adam's fall. The part that Eve plays in the second act appears also to be of key importance, because it is through her that the serpent is able to pass on his fatal suggestion to Adam. In other words, Eve seems to be essentially connected with the eating of the forbidden fruit and its consequences.

Now, as to the tree itself. It is described, without qualification, as the 'tree of the knowledge of good and evil', and Yahweh had warned Adam that to eat of it would be fatal to him—precisely: 'in the day that you eat of it you shall die'. The serpent, in tempting the Woman, denies that the fruit will kill, and explains that 'God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil'. Now, it is interesting to note that, in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the courtesan from the temple of Ishtar at Erech, after she has taught the wild-man Enkidu to eat bread, to wear clothes, and to have sexual experience, exclaims: 'Thou art wise, Enkidu, and become like a god.'<sup>5</sup>

When Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit, they do not immediately die,

<sup>1</sup> Genesis ii. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Gen. ii. 19. Cf. *Creation Legends*, pp. 123-4.

<sup>3</sup> Gen. ii. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Creation Legends*, pp. 126, 132-5.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Creation Legends*, pp. 127-32, where documentation is given.

as Yahweh had warned: instead 'their eyes were opened, and they knew that they were naked'.<sup>1</sup> Now, this statement must surely mean that they thus became aware of the significance of their nakedness; not that they observed the fact itself for the first time. In other words, by eating of the 'tree of knowledge of good and evil' they learn the significance of their being male and female, i.e. sexual knowledge, and the consequences of that knowledge, namely, the power of procreation.

But why should this knowledge have been regarded as fatal—that its acquisition involved disobedience to the Creator? The second question may best be answered first, since the answer has already been suggested in the serpent's words to Eve: that God knows 'that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil'. It is repeated in chapter iii. 22, when God is represented as saying: 'Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil. . . .' Now, in the context of Adam's acquiring sexual knowledge by eating of the forbidden fruit, this would seem to mean that Adam became thereby like his Creator—he, too, knew how to create life, to produce beings like himself.

But, we may ask, how was this sin of *hubris* on the part of Adam to have the universally mortal consequences that the Yahwist evidently implied it to have? Would it not have been enough for God just to have exterminated the first Man and Woman in punishment for their sin? God's threat was indeed fulfilled, if long delayed, by the eventual death of Adam and Eve; however, their deaths alone would not explain the cause of death which all their posterity have to experience.

The answer, to my mind, is found in what may be called the 'Myth of the Overcrowded Earth'. There is an abundance of evidence to show that primitive peoples have been very much alive to the Malthusian issue—namely, the pressure of population upon the food supply. Many folk tales relate how in the beginning there was a danger of overcrowding the earth, since children were born but old people continued to live. The situation was solved by some hero finding the way to die or to depart to the land of the dead. In other words, the logic of the fact that a new generation must replace the old has been well understood—that to produce children is to produce successors.<sup>2</sup> That the idea was known in Israel is attested by certain other evidence, though later in date than the Genesis story. For example, in the *Fourth Book of Ezra* (v. 43–4), Ezra is represented as asking God: 'Couldst thou not have created at one time all the generations of the past, the present, and the future, so that thy judgment might have been manifested the sooner? He answered me and said: the Creation cannot anticipate the Creator; moreover, the world could not support all the generations at one moment.' An

<sup>1</sup> *Gen.* iii. 6–7.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Creation Legends*, pp. 136–9. See also H. Schwarzbaum, 'The Overcrowded Earth', in *Numen*, vol. iv (1957), pp. 59–71.

interesting example also occurs in the so-called *Gospel according to the Egyptians*: 'The Lord said to Salome when she inquired: How long shall death prevail? As long as ye women bear children, not because life is an ill, and the creation evil: but as showing the sequence of nature: for in all cases birth is followed by decay.'<sup>1</sup>

We see, then, that in terms of such folk logic, Adam, as the Primal Man, by learning how, himself, to procreate, made his own death inevitable. For it was after his acquisition of the fatal knowledge that he 'knew' his wife and she conceived and bore children. Adam thus caused his own return to the 'adāmāh, from which he was taken. The Yahwist, accordingly, represents death as originating from this fatal knowledge of procreation that Adam acquired by disobedience to his Creator.

Whether the Yahwist was aware of the other implications of his thesis is unlikely—namely, that he meant to imply that Adam and Eve would have had no posterity, if they had obeyed their Maker and not eaten of the 'tree of the knowledge of good and evil'. It was doubtless enough for him that he had shown that man was mortal, and that nothing significant survived to sanction a mortuary cultus such as those that endangered Yahwism; for, as Yahweh determined, in decreeing Adam's fate: 'Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.'<sup>2</sup>

I would end by briefly noting that, as in Egypt and Mesopotamia, the primitive fear of death as a monster that snatches away its victim found expression also in Israel. Thus, while Hebrew monotheism forbade the idea of a death-god, the 'angel of Yahweh' fulfilled this grim role, and became in later Jewish thought 'Sammael', the angel of death, whose dread presence in a town was betokened by the howling of dogs.<sup>3</sup>

That death should thus have been personified in Hebrew religion is not surprising; for such personification is found in other advanced religions, for example, in both Christianity<sup>4</sup> and Buddhism.<sup>5</sup> That the disposition to personify death should be so universal in its manifestation is surely significant of our common human nature. Although our intellects can provide us with rational explanations of our common fate, the primitive and instinctive fear of death has ever caused our imaginations to envisage it as a grisly monster that snatches us away from 'the warm precincts of cheerful day', into a dark unknown world beyond.

<sup>1</sup> In M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, p. 11; see also Philo, *On the Creation*, liii, 1152.

<sup>2</sup> *Gen.* iii. 19.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Brandon, in *B. J. R. L.* vol. 43, pp. 325–6.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *History, Time and Deity*, pp. 61–3.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. L. de la Vallée Poussin in *E. R. E.* vol. viii, pp. 406b–407b.